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MOVING ON? DISPERSAL POLICY, ONWARD MIGRATION AND INTEGRATION OF REFUGEES IN THE UK



Executive Summary

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Executive summary

Since 2000, the UK has operated compulsory dispersal, a policy designed to ‘spread the burden’ of housing asylum seekers who require accommodation across the UK and to discourage long-term settlement in London and the South East. To enhance understanding of refugee integration in the UK, this research focuses on the onward migration decisions of those who were dispersed and later granted refugee or humanitarian protection status.

To date, much of the dispersal literature has critiqued the policy and focused on the negative outcomes for individuals removed from their networks. This project fills a knowledge gap surrounding the onward migration decisions and integration outcomes of refugees who were dispersed as asylum seekers in the UK.

The key findings of the project are:

- Dispersal policy has diversified the ethnic composition of UK cities, with evidence of growing numbers of refugees staying in the areas to which they were dispersed.
- Nevertheless, refugees who are dispersed as asylum seekers still have higher levels of onward migration than other new refugees.
- Multiple factors influence refugees’ decisions to stay or move on from dispersal locations, including co-ethnic and local communities, employment, education, life course, housing, place of dispersal, racism and health; variations are evident between different nationality groups.
- Onward migration can be a positive step taken towards integration, but it is also caused by homelessness, lack of employment, limited housing options or lack of job training, all of which can lead to instability and poor integration outcomes.
- Refugees may migrate onward or decide to stay after being dispersed, but neither of the two options can be regarded as always being the best for integration.

In this two-year (2012–14), ESRC-funded project, we mapped the geography of onward migration amongst refugees dispersed across the UK as asylum seekers. We then explored the main factors that influence refugees’ decisions to stay in a town or city or move on and considered how this affects the process of integration. Finally, we examined the policy implications for the different levels of government, service providers and the voluntary sector of the long-term impact of UK dispersal policy on refugee onward migration and integration.

The findings are based on quantitative and qualitative research data from four different sites across the UK: Glasgow, Cardiff, Manchester and London. The data includes 83 in-depth interviews with refugees, analysis of Refugee Integration and Employment Service (RIES) client data (2008–11) and analysis of the Home Office Survey of New Refugees (SNR) data (2005–09). We weave together quantitative and qualitative data analysis findings to address key questions surrounding refugee onward migration and integration outcomes.

Research findings

Refugee onward migration patterns

In the analysis, we distinguish between ‘stayers’ and ‘movers’ – those who migrate onward following dispersal. SNR data shows that new refugees who are dispersed are significantly more mobile in the initial eight months after being granted status and are more likely to move multiple times compared to those who never lived in dispersal housing.¹ Analysis of RIES client data between 2008–11,² however, shows that growing numbers of refugees are ‘stayers’, or those who remain in the city to which they were dispersed after being granted status:

- Two-thirds of refugees dispersed to Glasgow stayed in the city.
- Around 80 per cent of refugees dispersed to the Greater Manchester area decided to stay.

Based on analysis of the in-depth interviews, we found that refugees migrate onward to multiple and diverse locations around the UK for a range of reasons:

- Glasgow and Cardiff show evidence of growing ethnic diversity over the past decade, encouraging refugees to stay, but a lack of employment in particular can lead to onward migration.
- Manchester is seen as an attractive city in terms of size, amenities, ethnic communities and employment, which encourages refugees to stay and attracts refugees from other cities in the UK.
- Refugees onward migrate to London with high expectations in terms of opportunities and living conditions, which are not always realised.

Place

It was evident that a number of characteristics related to the dispersal location influences refugee onward migration decisions, including:

- interactions with British and other residents in neighbourhoods or the larger community;
- presence of existing ethnic communities, services and employment opportunities; and
- time spent in dispersal sites, which can either foster stability or prompt moving on in search of a ‘fresh start’.

‘I compared Scotland with England and it was a big difference, so I loved to be here [in Scotland]. People are different from England ... [In England] they’re not behaving with foreigners properly whereas in Scotland they are so friendly. We have so many Scots friends but no Iranian [friends].’³ [Anna, F, Iran, Glasgow]

‘I think we will stay in Cardiff. As you can imagine, we based something here. In case you turn to another city you have to start from the beginning, so it would be difficult.’ [Abdi, M, Syria, Cardiff]

¹ Refugees who are not dispersed as asylum seekers receive ‘subsistence only’ support, i.e. financial assistance, and find other accommodation, such as living with friends or family.

² Unfortunately, RIES data was unavailable for Cardiff (see Methods section in the final report for more information).

³ M and F are used to indicate the gender of interviewees, with pseudonyms employed.

Employment

A striking finding, which has implications for long-term refugee integration, is that new refugees who are dispersed have poorer employment outcomes, with onward migration improving the chances of employment:

- Refugees dispersed as asylum seekers are less likely to be in employment eight months after grant of status, compared to refugees choosing to live with friends or family (SNR data).
- Employment outcomes at 15 and 21 months after grant of status are better for refugee movers when compared to stayers (SNR data).
- Many refugees move towards co-ethnic communities to access employment opportunities.

'There are no jobs here. All the people that are leaving, they couldn't find a job. It's true. Because there were friends here, they looked for a job and couldn't find and they left. Three, four months [they searched] ... [There are jobs in] Sheffield, Newcastle, Manchester. If I find job, I'm going to stay here. If I not find, what can I do? They say Glasgow is beautiful and nice place, but just there is no job.' (Sara, F, Eritrea, Glasgow)

Social networks and co-ethnic communities

Although refugees do move towards existing co-ethnic communities, we also spoke to a significant number who did not wish to do so. We found evidence of:

- moves towards co-ethnic communities to access employment opportunities and/or for help with English language;
- good English language skills decreasing the tendency of refugees to migrate towards co-ethnic communities;
- closeness to co-ethnic communities being viewed as potentially hampering integration in UK society, which prevents onward moves; and
- refugees not moving toward a pre-existing co-ethnic community due to a lack of trust, a desire for privacy or internal community divisions.

'If I can speak the language, it's not important to live with my community. Once I speak English I can live anywhere.' (Birhane, M, Eritrea, Glasgow)

Community organisations

An important finding is that connections developed by refugees in dispersal sites and shared activities that transcend ethnicity, such as those provided through religious institutions or volunteering, cultivate positive feelings about place and foster stability.

'When I joined [this RCO], I learned so many things, how to talk to people and get experience. Community has been really important for me ... I don't want to be like people who stay here a long time just in their community and can't speak English. It's really important to meet different people and get to know other communities better.' (Moon, M, Eritrea, Manchester)

Life course

Similarly to the position for other migrant groups, we found that significant life course events can trigger refugees' decision to migrate onward, including marriage, the birth of a child, family reunification and relationship break-ups, and adults' educational career changes such as moving to access courses.

'[After my partner and I broke up], I got a new private flat [in Birmingham] ... I was there, she was there and I didn't want to go back to her. I was thinking that this is it, I have to leave Birmingham, I have to move on. Now I have no problem. I have my status, I can move wherever I want – Glasgow, Newcastle, wherever, London. I choose London.' [Hakim, M, Iraq, London]

Education

Access to education and time spent studying while seeking asylum strongly influences decisions about moving or staying, as well as impacting upon integration. We found:

- Access to adult and children's education, including English language classes, influences onward migration decisions.
- Children's education can lead to refugees remaining in or moving to locations with little or no existing co-ethnic community.
- Education enables refugees to gain knowledge and skills as well as forging the social networks and connections which are important for integration.

'I can live without [the Somali] community, but my children is very important, that's why I'm here. My children they like this school. My daughter, they say me, 'You never leave here. Mama, I love here, I want it.' [Amira, F, Somalia, Manchester]

Housing

We found significant and widespread experiences of homelessness amongst refugees after grant of status, which can lead to high levels of onward migration. This also negatively impacts upon access to adult and children's education, health and employment. We also discovered that:

- the local connection rule may prevent onward migration only in the short-term; and
- the local connection rule can prevent a subsequent desired return to the original dispersal site.

'When I came here [to London] and I went to the housing, they refused to give me any accommodation because they told me I'm intentionally homeless and they refused to help me. Then I went and lived with a friend for six months and after six months I have access to local housing. The problem now if I go to [Wales], the housing will consider me as intentionally homeless [again] so I must get my permanent accommodation in London and then I can swap and go there [to Wales].' [Omar, M, Iran, London]

Discrimination and racism

We found that refugees reported widespread experiences of racism in dispersal sites, including discrimination on local buses, from service providers and in the job market. Muslims, and women in particular because of their headscarves, described overt racism in post-9/11 Britain. The impact of such experiences includes:

- negative effects on refugees' mental health and exacerbated feelings of insecurity, anxiety and not belonging;
- refugees feeling unwelcome and considering moves to cities perceived as more diverse and multicultural; and
- negative impacts upon long-term integration, even in cities where refugees are content to live.

'Sometimes there's people calling you the names when you walk in the street, 'Oh, go back to your country'. But the most racist is the bus drivers. I believe that for myself. When you are standing the bus stop, if you are alone and you have headscarf and you're a black woman, they left for you even with my hand up.' [Dunia, F, Somalia, Glasgow]

'There've been issues with a lot of hate crime and we've had eggs thrown and sometimes you cannot walk in the street. Things got worse after September Eleven. As a Muslim and as a refugee, you know, that's two pressures you have to deal with ... I just felt very vulnerable.' [Faduma, F, Somalia, London]

Health

We found that stress caused by the asylum process, the process of being dispersed and the inability to onward migrate (due to the local connection rule) can trigger or contribute to poor mental health amongst refugees. Physical and mental health conditions influence onward migration decisions in different ways:

- Refugees may decide to move on due to negative experiences in dispersal sites or in search of suitable medical facilities.
- Refugees with mental health problems, such as depression, may decide to stay in dispersal sites for the sake of familiarity and stability.

'When I came here everything changed, maybe because I moved from other country. I had like depression, a lost trust ... Once I get here, I got health problems. Day after day, my health is destroyed, day by day.' [Fathia, F, Kuwait, Cardiff]

Conclusion

Overall, in the research we highlight the complexity of intersecting factors that influence refugee onward migration decisions and shape integration outcomes. We do this by drawing upon quantitative and qualitative data, providing specific examples and case studies from the in-depth interview sample. Rather than viewing onward migration as a failure of dispersal policy, we demonstrate how such choices can facilitate integration processes, an outcome that should be celebrated. We also reveal how urban landscapes have changed over time through dispersal policy, thereby creating increasingly diverse, multicultural cities that have become appealing settlement sites for many of the UK's new refugees. We use a mixed methods framework to present the positive and negative outcomes of dispersal policy, while offering suggestions that policy makers and service providers can use to promote successful refugee integration.

Recommendations

We examined policy implications of the findings in the key areas of employment, local communities, education, housing, racism and health. We have made several suggestions for specific policy makers, local authorities and service providers who work with refugees across the UK. A number of recommendations are discussed in the report conclusion, as well as our six separate policy briefings, but below we identify our top five recommendations:

The UK Government should allow asylum seekers to choose their dispersal location, subject to availability of adequate housing.

Asylum seekers should be placed in appropriate accommodation immediately upon dispersal and with a minimum amount of time spent in initial accommodation. Where moving to different accommodation is necessary, asylum seekers should be given

the choice to remain in the same area. Stability is key. Specifically, asylum seekers with healthcare needs should be allowed to choose their dispersal location, subject to availability of adequate housing and care services provision.

The UK Government, local authorities and the Department for Work and Pensions should ensure refugees are fully supported until they are in receipt of mainstream benefits and have access to housing after grant of status.

The current 28 days policy does not provide refugees with sufficient time to make informed decisions regarding housing and leads to high levels of onward migration and homelessness. There is a need to consider contracting the provision of asylum seeker accommodation to devolved governments and/or local authorities. By granting more powers to local authorities to oversee the provision of asylum accommodation, refugees should be enabled to stay temporarily in asylum accommodation until they find suitable, permanent housing, thereby limiting multiple moves during and after the asylum process. Devolved powers in relation to Universal Credit should be used to prevent homelessness and support refugees in accessing stable and appropriate housing.

Local authorities should develop clear guidance on the application of the 'local connection rule' to refugees and consider introducing flexibility for refugees who move to a city to seek employment or access training.

As in Scotland, refugees who have been dispersed should be exempt from the local connection rule, because they have been provided with asylum accommodation on a 'no choice' basis. This would allow refugees to move on to find employment or training, as well as enable refugees to return to dispersal sites in the future if desired. Local authorities should develop housing information packages for refugees specific to their circumstances and the local context, including the local connection rule, and ensure staff have the capacity to provide advice and assistance tailored to refugees' needs.

Local authorities should develop, coordinate and monitor a local refugee integration strategy, promoting a multi-agency approach.

All asylum seekers should be eligible to access free ESOL courses immediately after claiming asylum. The DWP should ensure Jobcentre Plus and Work Programme providers have sufficient knowledge of refugees' employment barriers as well as sufficient skills to address them, such as by providing training through partnership with specialist refugee providers. Refugees should be included as early access participants in employment programmes and be provided with appropriate job training and advice on how to find employment.

Local authorities should initiate multi-agency partnerships to tackle racism.

Partnerships should be linked to initiatives run by organisations such as Runnymede or the Migrants Rights Network as well as refugee organisations. Asylum seekers and refugees should provide input into and benefit from initiatives for tackling racism and hate crime. Police officers should receive training on issues affecting refugees and the barriers they face to reporting harassment. Bus operators should establish a mechanism to report racial harassment, encouraging passengers to make use of it and providing training and guidance to staff on identifying and handling racial harassment.

For more detailed information, see the full report: Stewart, E. and Shaffer, M. (2015) *Moving on? Dispersal Policy, Onward Migration and Integration of Refugees in the UK*, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow.

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